

Behind Laura Bush's Car Crash

The former first lady's memoir is hitting bookstores. Ann Louise Bardach talked to her old neighbors about 17-year-old Laura's grief-stricken seclusion and the breach with the family who lost a son.



Throughout the eight years of her husband's presidency, the subject of Laura Bush's role in a deadly car crash when she was a 17-year-old high school senior was considered off limits to the press. With an assist from friendly Texas officials, George W. Bush's staff prayed the details of her deadly crash would never emerge. For many years, the Midland city attorney and police department blocked the release of the [police report](#) of the accident, until lawyers for the tabloid The Globe successfully appealed to the state's attorney general. At the same time, the Bush family cautioned friends and former neighbors to be circumspect in their comments. During the 2000 election run-up, when I reached Billie Ruppe, who lived across from Laura's family, the Welches, on Humble Ave. in Midland for 25 years, she said quickly, "I'm not going to give you any information till I talk to Laura. I would need to get permission from her."

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But in her new memoir, *Spoken From the Heart*, Laura Bush finally discusses the matter (though she acknowledged its impact on her in Ann Gerhart's biography, *The Perfect Wife*). "In those awful seconds, the car door must have been flung open by the impact and my body rose in the air until gravity took over and I was pulled, hard and fast, back to earth," she writes in her new book. The whole time, "I was praying that the person in the other car was alive. In my mind, I was calling 'Please, God. Please, God. Please, God,' over and over and over again."

I interviewed several neighbors and friends of the former Laura Welch between 2000 and 2004 and all described the accident as shattering for young Laura, the family of the victim—indeed, the entire town of Midland. What emerges from the neighborhood is a story brimming with the pathos of a Dreiser novel—one that paints a very different portrait of Laura Welch Bush than the one created by White House strategists.

- [Speed Read: Laura Bush's Memoir Revealed](#) When asked in 1977 by her husband's grandmother, Dorothy Bush, "What do you do?" Laura answered tartly, "I read and I smoke." And the former First Lady reportedly still enjoys smoking (Winstons) and drinking

(margaritas)—though no one has suggested she has a problem. Still, her smoking and margaritas were airbrushed out of the official version of her First Ladyhood—as were her teen years as a vivacious only child from a loving but hard-partying family whose life was irrevocably altered by a carefree, careless moment.

Driving her father's brand new Chevy Impala on November 6, 1963, Laura Welch ran a stop sign on Farm Road 868 at 8:08 p.m. at 50 m.p.h., plowing into a Corvair sedan driven by Michael Dutton Douglas, the high school's track and football star, and according to some, a former beau of hers. The impact of the collision hurled Douglas' car some 50 feet off the road, instantly killing him. Laura and her passenger, schoolmate Judy Dykes, were both treated at the local hospital for their own bruises. It was there she learned that Douglas had died of a broken neck.

Laura Bush writes that she and her friend were hurrying to a drive-in; others thought she may have been returning to town from a party.

The Welches were not a religious family and not known for much church-going, but that night Laura prayed. "I lost my faith that November, lost it for many, many years," she writes now. "It was the first time that I had prayed to God for something, begged him for something, not the simple childhood wishing on a star but humbly begging for another human life. And it was as if no one heard. My begging, to my 17-year-old mind, had made no difference. The only answer was the sound of Mrs. Douglas' sobs on the other side of that thin emergency room curtain."

Jeannie Bohn, a childhood friend who also lived on Humble Ave. and graduated the same year as Laura from Robert E. Lee High, said, "Laura was just a lovely person to be around. Good manners, came from a good home," adding anxiously, "I don't want to say the wrong thing."

Bohn's brother Richard Pendleton noted that while Midland was a "dry" town of about 50,000, "everybody bought their booze in Odessa," 20 minutes away. In 2004, Lourcey Sams, another neighbor, told me: "I can tell you that if somebody dies in a traffic accident in Midland today, it would probably be on the front page of the Midland Reporter-Telegram," as it was on November 7th, 1963. A plaque honoring Michael Douglas still sits outside the high school and Laura's yearbook included a two-page memorial to Midland's lost golden boy.

"I didn't know him that well," recalled Bohn, who described herself as a dedicated "Bush Republican," with great affection for the Welch and Bush families. "He lived outside of town. My parents knew them. But he was a real popular boy, very well liked at school. He lived off a highway coming into Midland, out toward the country club at that time. And he was headed into town that night, Laura and Judy were coming around the loop. It was so tragic, and was such a devastating time for all of us at that time."

The accident was all the more horrific as Douglas' father had been driving right behind his son in another car and witnessed the deadly crash.

Pendleton, an accountant who usually votes Republican, said he only has fond memories of Laura Welch, who was a few years older than him. "I liked Laura. She was a nice girl, she was

always very friendly to me as a younger boy on the block." But he also never forgot her wild driving—what he described as her "two-wheeling." "We would be out there playing football or something, and I remember her coming around the corner on two wheels. She would come in pretty fast, and come to a screeching halt in the driveway and that was always kind of a joke. 'Oh, here comes Laura,'" recalled Pendleton.

The police report, which states that the road was "dry," "level" with "clear [visibility]," makes no mention whether alcohol was a factor in the accident; DUI tests were rarely conducted at that time. But booze was certainly a presence in the Welch home.

"I was their paper boy, and I would be over at their house every now and then mowing their lawn," recalled Pendleton. "What I remember about them is that every day at 4:00, you could set the clock for Happy Hour. Her mom and dad were lushes." He quickly adds, "They were nice people, don't get me wrong. I feel badly about saying that, but it was every day about 4:00 til about 7. And it was every day. I can always remember going over there, collecting for the paper, and they would be all in a good mood and laughing and partying and again always very friendly with me. I can't stress that enough. They were nice people. But they were partying people and so Laura grew up in that type of household. She was a party girl. And I was a party boy, too. Harold Welch would call over to my Dad to come over and have a drink, 'Bring your bottle with you.' He was a really nice man. Heavy set, full-faced, you know, heavy drinking guy, very gregarious, and her mother Jenna was a very good-looking lady—both heavy smoking, drinking types."

Bohn recalled how the accident crushed the Welch family, and how Laura did not return to school for at least a month. "I did go over and spend a lot of time with Laura and Mrs. Welch, and, you know, try to help them with their grief. She was in pretty bad [physical] shape, too," Bohn pointed out. "Laura was pretty banged up, and, uh, so was Judy. The thing that I remember the most is, again, the tragedy of it, and what our school felt, and what it did to our community. And what Laura and her family went through, and what the Douglas family went through. Laura went back to school and graduated with me. I do know that she was home for a very long time, because I took her homework home to her to keep her up in school."

The Welches did not attend Mike Douglas' funeral. Nor did Laura Welch reach out to the family. The accident irrevocably severed relations between the two families. Richard Pendleton remembers overhearing numerous phone calls between his father, who was president of a local bank, and Harold Welch, a successful homebuilder. "My sense was that the [Douglas] family was in the process of suing the Welches," recalled Pendleton. "I'm not sure if legal action was filed. Harold Welch had been talking a lot with my father about borrowing money. They did not bank at the bank that my father worked at, but I know they had been talking some about it, and that's how my father was privy to this. The [Douglas] family was calling the Welches every night. This was horrible. I mean, it wasn't going away. And even after they settled with them, and I don't know what or how much, [Mike Douglas'] mother kept calling Jenna Welch in the middle of the night crying, 'Your daughter killed my son.'"

Pendleton continued: "What I remember was my mother and father talking about [a settlement] and my father talking with Harold Welch about a settlement or the [Douglas] family suing. And they [the Welches] were concerned about this—very concerned and that it was a big deal and they weren't sure what to do....I remember my father saying, 'My god, this is a pretty serious deal, and it's going to be a pretty big financial blow to the Welches.'"

"It took us all a long time to heal from that," said Jeannie Bohn. "They were just devastated, that's all I can tell you. The parents were just devastated, the neighborhood was just devastated, the whole neighborhood, the whole school. And like I said, we were at a young age. And it had a real effect on Laura. A lasting effect on Laura. I've always thought of Laura as always a nice person then, and she's a nice person today."

"She was in the house for months," said Pendleton. "And when we first saw her again, she literally would go to the car with a hat on her head and sunglasses, like Jackie Kennedy or something. And it was straight from the car into the house, and she was not driving. Her mom and dad would be driving her or maybe a friend would let her off."

Several neighbors confirmed Laura Bush's admission that she never discussed the accident with friends. "We never talked to Laura about what happened," said one former classmate. "She never broached it with me and no one was ever going to bring it up if she didn't."

Everyone noted that their friend was not the same person after the accident. "Her personality before that was not librarian-like," recalled Pendleton. "That's probably a good way to put it. Laura would have been a cheerleader or somebody that would have been in public-type work. She was not Mother Teresa. She was an average girl who partied."

Correction: The year of the car accident was first reported to be 1973.

Ann Louise Bardach is author of [Without Fidel: A Death Foretold in Miami, Havana and Washington](#) and the acclaimed [Cuba Confidential](#). She is Daily Beast contributor, a PEN/USA award winning reporter, a member of the Brookings Institution Cuba Study Project, and was a contributing editor at Vanity Fair and has written for The New York Times, Washington Post Outlook, Los Angeles Times, and The Atlantic. She has appeared on 60 Minutes, Today, and CNN, NPR among others.